



Social Media as a Tool for Political Change: The Uprising in Iran (2009) and Egypt (2011)

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Social Media as a Tool for Political Change:
The Uprisings in Iran (2009) and Egypt (2011)

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Abstract

The 2009 Iranian uprising and the 2011 Egyptian uprising were widely publicized and closely followed by the global community. Social media became central to the way each uprising was experienced, and social media made a major contribution to the way the revolutions were explained to the outside world. Scholars and journalists have praised the role of social media in these two situations; Evgeny Morozov referred to it as a “liberator of authoritarian regimes,” and arguing that “democracy is just a tweet away.”¹

The uprisings were the result of a decade of social and political unrest and discontent among populations that were dissatisfied with their current regimes. In both cases, the effects of social media were undeniable catalyzing anger into protest over an authoritarian regime. Although it cannot be said that social media were the sole cause of these uprisings, social media did play a major role in bringing to the forefront a revolution that had been festering in the background for some time.

This thesis examines the extent to which social media played a role in the political uprisings in Iran and Egypt. It considers the various types of social media, the effects of each one in the efforts to mobilize protesters, and the very different responses of the respective government regimes in Iran and Egypt.

¹ Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion* (London, Penguin Books, 2011): 37.

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I would like to thank Dr. Doug Bond for his support along the way.

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Dedication

To my husband, who has offered continuous support throughout this entire Master's journey, and who has taught me to think critically, always. I am grateful for everything you have done. Without your support, I could not have done this.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The Internet, mobile phones, and social networking applications have transformed politics across North Africa and the Middle East.¹ This thesis will examine the uprisings that took place in Iran in 2009 and in Egypt in 2011 by comparing the degree to which social media was integral to political mobilization in Egypt as compared to Iran, and under what conditions social media played a role in each instance. In both cases, what began as a tool to help develop the economic and social sectors soon became a tool for a political change as well.

The 2009 Iranian uprising, which occurred after a disputed presidential election, caused the government to wage a vigorous campaign against Internet freedoms.² In Egypt, “the Egyptian government, aggressively and successfully pursued expanding access to the Internet as an engine of economic growth.”³ Ironically, that expansion ultimately became an important element that encouraged political change in the 2011 uprising. In both countries, social media tools were effectively used to coordinate and mobilize collective actions for political change.

¹ Philip Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

² Freedom House website, 3. See: <<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Scorechangeexplanations.pdf>>

³ Freedom House, 2.

The thesis aims to explain variations in the extent of social media as a driver and method of coordination, and why it was more extensive in the 2011 Egyptian uprising than in the 2009 Iran uprising. The nature and the degree of authoritarianism in each country was a pivotal factor. For example, in Iran, the government response was immediate, and there were few possibilities for free expression. In Egypt, the government tolerated more freedom of expression, and government responsiveness was slower, which enabled the uprising to build momentum.

The effect of social media and the Internet in both uprisings is undeniable. However, social media did not cause the uprisings, nor can social media explain the underlying reasons for the uprisings. Social media did affect how and when protests took place. Also, while socioeconomic issues played a role in fueling these uprisings, social media was crucial for bringing international attention to both movements by quickly spreading information about the protests. Social media facilitated both uprisings by sharing information and encouraging mobilization.

In Egypt, social media was used to organize citizens prior to the protests. Access to social media was relatively open, with no government oversight and the strong presence of international media sources. That uprising benefited from social media by using it as a tool for sharing and gaining international attention. The Egyptian government did not quickly block Internet communication, which enabled the momentum of the uprising to grow. Egyptians also relied on traditional media such as television, which has always been extremely popular in Egypt, and even today remains the most powerful medium in terms of outreach to the population.

In contrast, Iranian citizens perceived social media tools as useful and safe means for communicating without incurring government censorship and suppression. Citizens used every possible tool (Facebook, Twitter, text messaging) to coordinate and protest but they were eventually “brought to their knees by violent crackdowns.”⁴ Following the election, the Iranian government blocked all social media sites except Twitter, and in fact used social media to propel its own counter-strategies. The government intensely filtered social networking sites and mobile phones, and many cyber activists and journalists were arrested.⁵

The outcome of each uprising was influenced by a complex mix of variables. The extent and availability of social media had a part in shaping the distinctive nature of authoritarian rule in each country, which helps to explain each government’s initial response to its respective uprising.

I hypothesize that the nature and level of the authoritarian regime is a critical factor in the effective use of social media for political mobilization. For example, Egypt under Mubarak had an authoritarian regime, but one that permitted more freedom of expression than was allowed in Iran. Egypt’s tolerance for dissent was higher, and its citizens had greater access to external media sources. In Iran, Internet censorship is one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated systems in the world.

The socioeconomic differences between the two countries is important for understanding the nature of the uprisings and the power structure of each authoritarian

⁴ Shirky, Clay. “The political power of social media.” *Council of Foreign Affairs*. January/February 2011. Available from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2010-12-20/political-power-social-media>. Accessed Feb. 21, 2017

⁵ Freedom House, 2-3.

regime. In Egypt, the government provided limited subsidies to keep the population content and to maintain the government's quasi-authoritarian rule. Previous fuel subsidies proved to be too costly to maintain, amounting to 8% of Egypt's GDP. Because Egypt is not a rentier state,⁶ its subsidy system became increasingly unsustainable. The government was unable to expand employment to pacify protestors. In Iran, however, the economy was heavily dependent on income from fuel, and as a rentier state it had a long history of subsidizing welfare and state security organizations to serve the regime's interests and to pacify the population. The financial resources of the Iranian government enabled it to more easily create employment during periods of discontent.

To assess the hypothesis, I will rely on scholarly works published in academic journals, books written by experts, and data derived from social media tools, specifically data concerning the number of people joining Facebook and Twitter during the Iranian and Egyptian uprisings. This data will show the Internet penetration of social media tools. I will also examine how quickly a message is disseminated to a wide audience based on how often a tweet is re-tweeted; which will reveal the effect that social media had on mobilization. In addition, I will analyze the government's initial response to its respective uprising and the counterstrategies utilized.

This study discusses the extent to which social media played a role in the dynamics of political mobilization compared to other causal variables. To analyze these two uprisings, I use the comparative method to clarify the diverse factors that contributed to the 2009 Iranian uprising and the 2011 Egyptian uprising. I use a method known as Most Similar System Design (MSSD), which analyzes similarities between the two

⁶ A rentier nation is one that derives all or a substantial portion of its national revenues from the rent of indigenous resources to external clients. Source: < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rentier_state>.

countries, with the differences explaining the outcome of interest, which in this case is the extent to which social media facilitated mobilization. The main explanatory variable is the type of political regime, more specifically, the particular modes of social control that characterized the Egyptian and Iranian styles of authoritarianism. This in turn shaped the degree to which citizens were able to use social media to facilitate social mobilization. Table 1 illustrates the MSSD system to identify dependent variables that contributed to two very different outcomes.

Table 1: The Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD)

ATTRIBUTE	EGYPT	IRAN
Population size	88 million	81 million
Youth unemployment	24%	26%
Literacy rate	75%	83 %
Inflation rate/ income gaps	10%	13%
Internet penetration	31/100 people	39/100 people
Mobile subscriptions	114/ 100 people	88/100 people
Regime Type	Authoritarian (republic)	Authoritarian (Islamic Republic)
Regime mode of social control	Egypt score: -3—moderate authoritarianism, more freedom & liberty regarding political participation	Iran score: -7—autocratic regime with limited political participation in the country
Outcome: use of social media in social mobilization	High	Low

Source: thesis author

As Table 1 shows, the use of social media in the Egyptian uprising is high because Egyptian protesters successfully utilized it to organize and inform the world of their current situation and thus gain international support. In Iran, heavy government censorship was detrimental to the uprising. Citizens were unable to use social media to organize, and the desired outcome was low to unrealized.

The regime in Egypt is characterized as a republic, while the Iranian regime is identified as an Islamic republic. However, the nature of the authoritarianism in each country had different impacts on the extent and use of social media. The authoritarian regime in Egypt was dynamic in nature, and lauded as being open to change. However, Steven Cook said: “[T]he incremental nature of the numerous reforms portrays a static nature, . . . there is almost constant political activity on various fronts, but no movement of the central interests of the state away from the core of the authoritarian leader.”⁷

In order to maintain a strong hand in the regime, President Mubarak needed the support of the military, and his dominance was ensured because the military remained loyal to him for 30 years. However, that changed during the Egyptian uprising, and the loss of military support played a decisive role in the strength of the political mobilization and the use of social media to support and keep mobilization strong.

In contrast, the authoritarian regime in Iran was stricter and tolerated little freedom of expression. As an Islamic Republic, the religious authorities governed, and religious law was part of the country’s legal code.⁸ The Iranian government had some difficulty dealing with the popular culture and social media, viewing the new

⁷ Steven Cook, *Ruling but Not Governing: The Military and Political Development In Egypt, Algeria, And Turkey* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), ix.

⁸ Sergey Votyagov, “Islamic Republic of Iran; Comparative National Systems.” 2009. Available from: <http://www.mitchellorenstein.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Iran.pdf>. Accessed Feb. 21, 2017.

technologies as a major threat to the regime. During the 2009 uprising, the Iranian government forbade coverage of demonstrations, and arrested a large number of journalists and protestors. It severely filtered, then blocked all social networks and websites. Eventually the Iranian government hacked into social media accounts and used it found there as a tool to “extract information to identify key leaders, and disrupting attempts to organize protests.”⁹ This helped the regime to maintain its power by monitoring and intimidating its citizens.

The Iranian government eventually suppressed the uprising because it had the full support of the military. The Iranian military is very much tied to the Supreme Leader, and it is the military’s best interests to protect the current regime and its own survival. With the support of the government, the Iranian military was brutal and ruthless when the uprising began, it did everything to contain the situation.

⁹ Kathleen German, “Social Media and Citizen Journalism in the 2009 Iranian Protests: The Case of Neda Agha-Soltan,” *Journal of Mass Communication Journalism* 4, no. 5 (2014): 4.

Chapter II

Background

Social media is a driving force that has a significant global impact on social and political change. It is also a critical tool available virtually worldwide to activists, citizens, telecommunication firms, nongovernmental organizations, governments, software providers, and civil society actors in general. Recently it has become an important resource for mobilizing, forming collective action, and stirring social movements around the world. The phenomenon of social media was made possible by innovative developments in communications, which in recent decades have become ever more complex. Technological advances have facilitated greater access to information, given most citizen more opportunities to engage in public speech and to undertake and join collective action.

Political mobilization via social media was evident from the Arab Spring movement, but it was also present in the revolutions in Moldova, Iran, and Tunis.¹⁰ The use of social media by opposition activists does not automatically guarantee successful results. What is clear is that social media is changing the game of politics and the nature of social movements by creating challenges for countries that are unprepared and ill-equipped.¹¹

¹⁰ Nahed Eltantawy, and Julie B. Wiest, "The Arab spring—social media in the Egyptian revolution: Reconsidering resource mobilization theory," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 18.

¹¹ Magdalena Wojcieszak, and Brian Smith, "Will politics be tweeted? New media use by Iranian youth in 2011," *New Media & Society* 16, no. 1 (2014): 100.

The arrival of social media has stirred debates among scholars regarding its importance and effectiveness for social mobilization. On one side are scholars that celebrate the Internet and argue that social media plays a major role in forming collective actions, but they also believe it is not an effective tool for political mobilization. The other side recognizes the role of social media in political mobilization, but argues that its role should not be overstated. This thesis examines both sides of debate as it relates to the 2009 Iranian uprising and the 2011 Egyptian uprising. I will show that the Iranian revolution demonstrated that social media alone was not enough to successfully mobilize the populace. By comparison, the Egyptian uprising illustrates the extent to which the use of social media contributed to successful political mobilization. I also found that certain aspects of a social-media-based revolution are necessary for a revolution to be successful—or at least greatly facilitate its success.

There is broad agreement among scholars such as Miriyam Aouragh and Anne Alexander that social media was not the only contributor to these uprisings. Several other factors and activities contributed to the development of events that triggered the uprisings. In both instances, the uprising emerged out of an environment of sustained oppression and discontent.¹² According to Nahed Eltantawy and Julie Wiest, factors such as social and economic uncertainty, high youth unemployment, and corruption fed local tensions until the angry mood of the country erupted. The overall despair of everyday life coupled with a political climate, seemed to be the tipping point that caused citizens

¹² Miriyam Aouragh, and Anne Alexander, “The Egyptian experience: Sense and nonsense of the Internet revolution,” *International Journal of Communication*, 5 (2011): 1344-1358.

to revolt and to form a strong basis for mass mobilization.¹³ As Samuel Huntington argues, instability surfaces when institutions cannot keep up with societal and economic change. This shows that social, institutional, and economic contexts provide the underlying motives and conditions for social movements.¹⁴

Research Variables

The variables to be examined are the outcome variable and the explanatory variable. The explanatory variable is comprised of the socioeconomic and institutional attributes that these two countries share similarities. I will elaborate on each of these variables and their measures to demonstrate their full effect in each uprising.

The institutional variable is the political regime in each country. Both countries are ruled by authoritarian regimes that lack democracy, where levels of corruption are embedded and are directly linked with the socioeconomic factors that cause unbearable deprivation and economic inequality.

To measure the level of each authoritarian regime, I used the Polity Project report, which captures and then measures the authority of each regime based on a three-part categorization: autocracies (-10 to -6), anocracies (-5 to +5), and democracies (+6 to +10). In addition to the Polity Project report I also describe each regime structure in order to portray different levels of authoritarianism.¹⁵

¹³ Eltantawy and Wiest, "The Arab Spring," 5.

¹⁴ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 412.

¹⁵ Polity Project report. Available from: <<http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>>

Variables in the Egyptian Regime

The Egyptian regime is secular and not ideological it is based on republicanism and in theory is a semi-presidential system of government.¹⁶ The country has been under emergency law for almost half a century in order to maintain national security. As Katie Wright notes, laws in effect at the time allowed the Egyptian government to revoke countless basic constitutional rights. The Egyptian people suffered severe police brutality, mass censorship, detention without charge and torture at the hands of State Security Officers and police.¹⁷ Citizens had greater access to social media and international sources of information, and satellite television was allowed.

In the Polity Project report, Egypt scored -3, which is on the moderate spectrum of authoritarianism, with more freedom and liberty when it comes to political participation. While there were some 13 recognized political parties in Egypt, they were subject to systematic and widespread restrictions. In sum, political participation was restricted.

Variables in the Iranian Regime

In 2011, the Iranian regime was based on a unique fusion of religious and political authority. Iran was (and is today) a theocratic Islamic Republic led by a Supreme Leader who exerts ideological and political power over a system dominated by clerics. The regime uses religion and Islamic philosophies to justify criminal behavior and oppression. According to Green, et al., the Iranian regime is closed, secretive, and clannish making

¹⁶ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Egypt>

¹⁷ Katie B. Wright, "Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice: Understanding the Egyptian Revolution," (Lake Forest, IL: Lake Forest College Publications, 2013): 5. Available from: <http://publications.lakeforest.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=firstyear_writing_contest>

the system intensely fractured and multipolar.¹⁸ To understand this complex system, the role of major players and formal institutions is crucial. In Iran, the most powerful political figure is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who has kept his vision of the Islamic Republic remarkably resolute and consistent over the past 18 years. Much of his strength rests on his presumed moral authority and his skillful orchestration of informal networks by blocking any alternative approaches to the Iranian system. Most important, much of the Supreme Leader's influence rests on his ability to mediate, and placate constituencies within Iran's defense and security establishment.¹⁹ Beneath the office of the Supreme Leader there is a highly pluralistic political system comprising more than 200 parties and countless informal networks. In addition, there is a complicated structure of the defense establishment and its representative institutions.²⁰ As a rentier state, Iran derives a large portion of its revenues from external rents, namely, the sale of oil, which remains the most important driver of economic growth and the source of political and financial power in Iran.

The Polity Progress report measures authoritarianism in Iran at -7, which is defined as an autocratic regime with very limited political participation in the country. This is because the regime structure is which the ruling Islamic clergy controls political competition, and all the candidates for the elected offices need to be approved by the

¹⁸ Jerrold D. Green, Frederic Wehrey, Charles Wolf, Jr., "Understanding Iran" (Santa Monica, CA: Rand National Security Research Division, 2009): 30. Available from: <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG771.pdf>

¹⁹ Green, Wehrey, and Wolf, "Understanding Iran," 30.

²⁰ Green, Wehrey, and Wolf, "Understanding Iran," 25.

Council of Guardians on the basis of an ill-defined set of requirements.²¹ That level of authoritarians also limits freedom of speech and the involvement of social media in the country. Only the state-run media were allowed, and they were restricted and censored. The government also used social media and the Internet as tools for counter strategy and intimidation.

Socioeconomic Variables

Socioeconomic variables also effected the uprisings in both countries. These variables include: a high number of young people as a percentage of the population, and a high level of unemployment among those young people.

Egypt and Iran are comparable in population size and with the similar population profile: 60% of the population are young people under the age of 30. In both countries, young people are facile with social media and well educated. Both countries struggle to generate sufficient jobs annually to employ new graduates. In 2010, unemployment among young people in Iran was 23%, and in Egypt it was 25%.²² High unemployment often has a direct correlation with uprisings, and contributes strongly to overall discontent.²³ In addition to the unemployment, there was a high income-inequality gap and poverty rates that contributed to an already tense political climate.

²¹ Polity Project report.

²² World Bank, "MENA Quarterly Economic Brief," Issue 2 (January 2014): 9. Available from: <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/QEBissue2January2014FINAL.pdf>.

²³ World Bank, "MENA Quarterly Economic Brief," 9.

Technology Variable

The technology variable examines the extent to which social media played an important role in contributing to mobilization in Egypt and Iran. In Egypt, almost everyone has access to a mobile phone. The country has the largest Internet user population in the region, second only to Iran. In Egypt in 2011 there were approximately 20 million Internet users. The number of mobile phone users has grown to 55 million, or a 67% penetration rate.²⁴ Egypt leads Arab countries in terms of Facebook use; at the end of 2010, there were more than 4.5 million users.²⁵

In 2009, Iran had 30.2 million mobile phone users, or put another way, 88 cellular subscriptions for every 100 people.²⁶ Internet users in Iran account for approximately 48.5% of the population.²⁷ Today Iran has the nineteenth-largest population in the world, and its blogosphere ranks number three in terms of users—behind only the United States and China.²⁸ In summary, both countries had access to social media tools, but in Iran Internet access was obstructed by the regime at the time of the 2009 uprising.

²⁴ Freedom House, 124.

²⁵ Freedom House, 125.

²⁶ Sanja Kelly, and Sarah Cook, eds., “Freedom on the Net 2011: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media,” Freedom House, 2011. Available from: <<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN2011.pdf>>

²⁷ “Usage and Population Statistics.” Available from: <<http://www.Internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm>>.

²⁸ Sara Beth Elson, Douglas Yeung, Parisa Roshan, S. R. Bohandy, and Alireza Nader, *Using Social Media to Gauge Iranian Public Opinion and Mood After the 2009 Election* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012). Available from: <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2012/RAND_TR1161.pdf>

Social Media Tools

Social media tools are part of the broader sphere of information communication technology, and can be defined as “tools and utilities that allow online communication and individual participation.”²⁹ The term *social media* refers to networks and information technology that use the interactive form and user-produced content. Websites and applications enable users to create and share content and to network with others. In this section, I will examine Internet penetration and tools that were available and used in Iran and Egypt during the period 2009 to 2011. My aim is to determine the extent to which various tools were integral to political mobilization during the uprisings in those countries.

There is no doubt that social media provided protesters in both countries with new resources. Those media facilitated the spread of messages through a dense network that connected people with similar interests and goals in every country in the world. According to Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns, social media was one of the key causes of the protests. While some think the role of social media was limited to organizing protests and mobilizing protesters, others point to its role in publicizing forthcoming events.³⁰ In this thesis, I will focus on four social media tools that played a crucial role in the uprisings in Iran and Egypt: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blog sites.

²⁹ Alex Newson, and Justin Patten, “Blogging and Other Social Media: Exploiting the Technology and Protecting the Enterprise,” *Journal Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services*, .35, no. 4 (2009): 3.

³⁰ Nadia Idle, and Alex Nunns, *Tweets from Tahrir: Egypt's Revolution as it Unfolded, in the Words of the People Who Made It*. (E-book, 2011). Available from: <<http://www.orbooks.com/catalog/tweets-from-tahrir/>>.

Facebook

Facebook is a social networking website launched in 2004. As of 2016, it had over 1.59 billion active users worldwide.³¹ Facebook allows registered users to create profiles, send messages, upload photos and videos, and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues.

During the uprisings, Facebook was used to create interest groups or “like” pages where people could share opinions regarding specific topics. This feature became the main platform from which Egyptians shared collective dissent and organized the uprising.

It is important to note that 51.7% of Facebook users access their accounts via their mobile phone. This was a crucial role of social media during the “Arab Spring” uprisings.³² Statistics shows that 41% Egyptian Facebook users are between the ages of 18 and 24 years old.³³ With some 4.7 million Facebook users, Egypt constitutes about 22% of total users in the Arab region.³⁴

Twitter

Twitter is a real-time information network that connects user with the latest information. It can be used to organize and disseminate news by bypassing the

³¹ Statista: The Statistics Portal, “Global social networks ranked by number of users.” 2014. Available from: <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>> Accessed Feb. 12, 2017.

³² Statista: Statistics Portal.

³³ Statista: Statistics Portal.

³⁴ Arab Social Media Report , “Facebook Usage: Factors and Analysis,” Dubai School of Government, 2011. Available from: <<http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/UserManagement/PDF/ASMR%20Report%201.pdf>>. Accessed Feb. 12, 2017.

cumbersome operations of mainstream media.³⁵ Users communicate via “tweets,” which are short messages (limited to 140 characters) that also allow embedded media links. Tweets can be read remotely from different websites, or they can be received as a text message. There is no need to visit a website to read a tweet. Like to Facebook interest pages, Twitter users can subscribe to follow or receive updates on topics of interest or any conventional media new sources and posts.

During the 2009 Iranian so-called “Twitter Revolution,” the most popular hashtag was *#iranelection*, which reached 220,000 tweet per hour.³⁶ In March 2011, during the Egyptian uprising, the numbers were even higher. The most popular hashtags were *#egypt* (1.4 million mentions) and *#jan25* (1.2 million).³⁷

YouTube

YouTube is a website primarily used to upload and share videos. It has over a billion users, with more than half of its views and uploads coming from mobile devices.³⁸ YouTube provides a platform for individuals to interact, inform, and inspire others nationally and internationally. During the Egyptian uprising, a number of uploaded videos documented episodes of police brutality, which were subsequently shared on

³⁵ Petros Iosofidis, and Mark Wheeler, “The public sphere and network democracy: Social movements and political change,” *Global Media Journal*. Available from: <<https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/the-public-sphere-and-network-democracy-social-movements-and-political-change.php?aid=64445>>. Accessed Feb. 16, 2017.

³⁶ Payvand blog site. “Iran’s elections topped Twitter’s list of most popular topics of 2009.” See: <<http://payvand.com/blog/blog/2009/12/17/irans-elections-topped-twitters-list-of-most-popular-topics-of-2009/>> Accessed Feb. 12, 2017.

³⁷ Mourtada Racha, and Salem Fadi. “Civil movements: The impact of Facebook NS Twitter,” *Arab Social Media Report* (2011): 28.

³⁸ YouTube statistics. Available from: <<https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>>

YouTube for the rest of the world to view. The Iranian government foresaw the impact that YouTube could have globally and, as a consequence, during the post-election period YouTube was blocked for use within Iran.

Weblogs

Also, referred as “blogs,” are regularly updated websites similar to an online personal journal. A blog is usually run by an individual or a group sharing the information in informal and conversational style. Blogs were helpful for providing consistent updates during both uprisings. In the case of the Iranian revolution, Andrew Sullivan provided minute-by-minute updates on the situation in Tehran. At the time of the uprising, he was based in London but blogged continually with updates that the Iranian people had tried to share with the rest of the world. Sullivan shared their tweets and videos on his blog to raise international awareness about the situation in Tehran. Sullivan called Twitter “a critical tool in organizing the resistance in Iran.”

Over the last ten years, the Arab region has experienced the highest rates of technology adoption amongst all developing nations.³⁹ Among the transformations in the information environment in the Arab world was the introduction of satellite TV in the late 1990s. Al-Jazeera, a major news outlet in the Middle East, opened new space for political communication, thereby breaking the ability of states to control the flow of information, while also producing a new kind of Arab public sphere. Al Jazeera’s audience grew rapidly, and today it is perhaps the most widely read and viewed online news source in

³⁹ Howard, “The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy,” 19-20.

the Arab world.⁴⁰ It has played an indispensable role in amplifying social media narratives internationally. During the protest in Tahrir Square, activists pleaded with Al Jazeera not to stop filming, saying, “If you switch off your cameras tonight, there will be genocide . . . You are protecting us by showing what is happening in Tahrir Square”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Marc Lynch, “After Egypt: The limits and promise of online challenges to the authoritarian Arab state,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011): 304.

⁴¹ Philip N. Howard, and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90. Also available from: <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/117564/Democracy's+Fourth+Wave.pdf?sequence=1>.

Chapter III

Literature Review

Social media tools made headlines in the Arab uprisings because of their contributions and effectiveness. However, Bruce Bimber stated that the social media debate is controversial. On one side there are scholars who believe that social media played a crucial role in the political mobilization in Iran and Egypt.⁴² The other side believes that social media is not the only factor responsible for the uprisings, suggesting that deep-rooted discontent with political and social conditions played a major part in the uprisings. Authors Aouragh and Alexander,⁴³ and Eltantawy and Wiest,⁴⁴ believe that other factors contributed to the development of events that triggered the protests. Analysis of both sides of the social media debate illustrates the nature of these discussions and the different views pertaining to the role of social media in the uprisings. It compares the different points of view and sheds light on how social media has been viewed both in a comparative and a theoretical perspective.

There are several possible explanations regarding the outcome and why the use of social media had a different impact in these two countries. One explanation focuses on

⁴² Bruce Bimber, "The Internet and political transformation: Populism, community and accelerated pluralism," *Polity* 31 (1998): 133-160.

⁴³ Aouragh and Alexander, "The Egyptian Experience," 1344-1358.

⁴⁴ Eltantawy and Wiest, "The Arab spring," 5.

the regime structure and the government's response to the uprising.⁴⁵ Both countries have authoritarian regimes, but on authoritarianism scale, Egypt was ranked lower, with a freer political climate and freer political expression. This is confirmed by the regime's responsiveness: during the uprising, the Egyptian government did not oppose the protestors nor did it shut down all social media.⁴⁶ In contrast, the Iranian regime's swift response was brutal and inflexible. The intensity of aggression by the government had the psychological impact of striking fear into the protestors.⁴⁷ Also, the government used the same social media to track down and intimidate protestors.

Evgeny Morozov⁴⁸ argues that social media was not a crucial player in the uprisings in these two countries; indeed, he is skeptical of the political capabilities of social media. He believes that Twitter or any social media can only be successful in "regimes where the state apparatus is completely ignorant of the Internet and has no presence of its own."⁴⁹ The Iranian uprising proved Morozov was right: the use of social media by protestors left them vulnerable to government surveillance. While the protestors used social media to advance their cause, the Iranian authorities used the same social media against the protestors. The Iranian government involvement in technology and social media played a decisive role in the outcome of the uprising.

⁴⁵ Ali Ahmadi Motlagh, "Egypt and Iran: A comparison of two mass movements," Muftah, 2011. Available from: <<http://muftah.org/egypt-iran-a-comparison-of-two-mass-movements-by-ali-ahmadi-motlagh/#.WJfDINIZXoo>>. Accessed February 16, 2017.

⁴⁶ Motlagh, "Egypt and Iran."

⁴⁷ Motlagh, "Egypt and Iran."

⁴⁸ Morozov is a writer and researcher who studies the political and social implications of technology.

⁴⁹ Evgeny Morozov, "Iran: Downside to the 'Twitter Revolution,'" *Dissent* (2009): 12.

Another possible explanation for the successful outcome in Egypt was the resources that were available during the protest. The Egyptian government did not seek to control the use of social media or traditional media, such as satellite television, mainly Al Jazeera, which was present at the time in Cairo.⁵⁰

Scholars such as Marc Lynch⁵¹ believe that traditional media, with the help of social media, played a vital role in the 2011 uprising. He argues that satellite television, local radio, semi-independent press outlets, and the Internet propelled the 2011 revolution, acting as an accelerant and intensifier of many forms of political mobilization and facilitating sudden outbursts of intense contention.⁵² Social media had the resources to organize movements, spread information, and evade governmental control of the flow of news and ideas.

Lynch's views on social media are relatively modest compared to Philip Howard,⁵³ who argues that social media was the catalyst that enabled the protests to begin and then to spread the uprising. He argues:

The importance of the Internet for contemporary Arab civil society actors can be attributed two factors: first, groups were pushed online because many other political communications were inaccessible. Second, the Internet enabled content to be hosted on servers beyond state censorship and afforded anonymity to those who advanced political criticism. . . .

⁵⁰ Habibul Haque Khondker, "Role of the new media in the Arab Spring," *Globalization* (2011): 675-679.

⁵¹ Lynch is a Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University and the author of many books on the Middle East.

⁵² Lynch, "After Egypt," 304.

⁵³ Philip Howard is a Professor at the University of Washington and the author of numerous empirical research articles on the use of digital media for social control in both democracies and authoritarian regimes.

During the uprising the Internet provided virtual space for political communication.⁵⁴

Clay Shirky⁵⁵ sees social media tools as a natural evolution whereby social media has replaced old mobilization structures and become the new tool for coordinating current popular movements throughout the world, mainly because of the capabilities that “social media has introduced: the speed and interactivity that were lacking in the traditional mobilization techniques, which generally included the use of leaflets, posters, and faxes.”⁵⁶ During the Arab uprising, Facebook and Twitter reached millions of people around the world as events were happening, facilitating a mass mobilization and reinforcing collective actions of protestors.

⁵⁴ Howard and Hussain, “Democracy’s Fourth Wave,” 5.

⁵⁵ Clay Shirky is a professor, writer, and consultant on the social and economic effects of Internet technologies.

⁵⁶ Eltantawy and Wiest, “The Arab spring,” 7.

Chapter IV

The Political Situation in Egypt

The authoritarianism that characterized Hosni Mubarak's time in office could be called a "triple-hybrid regime, meaning the governing structure has characteristics of all three types of an authoritarian system: personalist, militarist, and single-party."⁵⁷

Mubarak's authoritarian style was distinct, and through a system of patronage he ensured his continued strong position in the country.

Jason Brownlee is a theorist on authoritarian regimes who posits a compelling perspective on institutional factors as the main guarantor of regime perseverance. He cites the significance of "two conditions necessary for the maintenance of the system."⁵⁸ as an indicator of how well a regime will survive: "First, the new administration must exploit its underlying influence over the state to shape establishments that channel its own energy into the basic hubs of society that must be controlled to deter challenge to its rule. . . . Second, the administration ought to organization some type of restricted races, . . . which will redirect some resistance activities into seeking a stake in the administration."⁵⁹ Brownlee cites a third truth about authoritarian regimes as the effective

⁵⁷ Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28.

⁵⁸ Quoted in: Andrea M. Perkins, "Mubarak's machine: The durability of the authoritarian regime in Egypt," Graduate thesis, University of South Florida, 2010: 7. Available from: <<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2736&context=etd>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

⁵⁹ Perkins, "Mubarak's machine," 7.

management of elite conflict [that] facilitates the protection of the regime through patronage relationships.⁶⁰ Mubarak did just this, which eliminated any friction from the elites.

For some time, Mubarak maintained a solid political assembly that allowed the authoritarian regime to sanction structures and procedures that supported a strong and abusive apparatus ranging from security powers to media oversight. One example was the Emergency Law, implemented in 1981, which reduced citizens' rights and criminalized any activity regarded as destructive to the state. This permitted the administration to use expansive interpretations of "destructive to the state" to legitimize crackdowns on any political difference.⁶¹

To some, the 2011 Egyptian uprising might have come as a surprise, but for the Egyptian people it was a natural evolution of long-simmering resentment, social injustices, and discontent. The revolt was characterized by three decades of pervasive restlessness due to unemployment, corruption, inequality and lack of democracy. The Egyptian people advocated for a democratic government, while President Mubarak utilized a dictatorial form of governance that he believed was impervious to change.

While it is hard to argue that social media was crucial to the Egyptian uprising, it certainly had a significant impact. The 2011 uprising did not come out of nowhere. Rather, it was the product of years of repression, fueled by anger at the authoritarian structure of governance, the lack of democracy, and rampant socioeconomic problems

⁶⁰ Perkins, "Mubarak's machine," 7.

⁶¹ Brownlee, "Authoritarianism," 203.

coupled with high unemployment among educated youth, social inequality, and deteriorating economic conditions, which fomented political mobilization.

Ann Lesch found that prior to the 2011 uprising, corruption was prevalent, reaching its highest point in the mid-2000s.⁶² Newly appointed ministers used their influence to acquire and sell large portions of the public sector for their personal gain, enabling them to advance their personal interests to the detriment of the Egyptian people.⁶³

The lack of democracy also played a part. President Mubarak ruled for three decades by establishing a bureaucratic government in which all powers were centralized in the executive branch,⁶⁴ and there was no transparency in parliamentary elections. Human rights abuse were apparent in the myriad demonstrations that were quashed by the heavy hand of the Emergency Law. The country had been in a constant state of emergency since 1967, which gave security forces the power to detain protesters for long periods of time without formal charges, and censoring the media.⁶⁵ All of this led to a situation ripe for revolution.

Socioeconomic factors contributed significantly to the deteriorating conditions. The overall economy of Egypt showed signs of improvement, with positive GDP growth:

⁶² Ann M. Lesch, "Egypt's Spring: Causes of the Revolution," *Middle East Policy Council XVIII*, no. 3 (2011): 1–8.

⁶³ Gokhan Akcesme, "Poverty and economic inequality as the leading causes of the 2011 Egyptian revolution," *International Journal of Political Science and Development*, 3, no. 9 (Sept. 2015): 353–375. Available from: <<http://www.academicresearchjournals.org/IJPSD/PDF/2015/September/AKCESME.pdf>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

⁶⁴ Lesch, "Egypt's Spring, 1–8.

⁶⁵ Eltantawy and Wiest, "Arab Spring," 5.

from 5% in the mid-1990s to 7% from 2006 to 2008.⁶⁶ However, the gap between rich and poor was enormous. While the Egyptian economy grew, this growth did not trickle down due to corruption that benefited only the regime's narrow political base. A 2008 United Nations report showed that 20% of the Egyptian population lived below the poverty line.⁶⁷ Even at the peak of the global economic boom, when the Egypt nation itself recorded annual economic growth of 7.2 %, the number of Egyptians living below poverty line (defined as \$2/day) rose from 17.8% to 23% (see Figure 1).⁶⁸

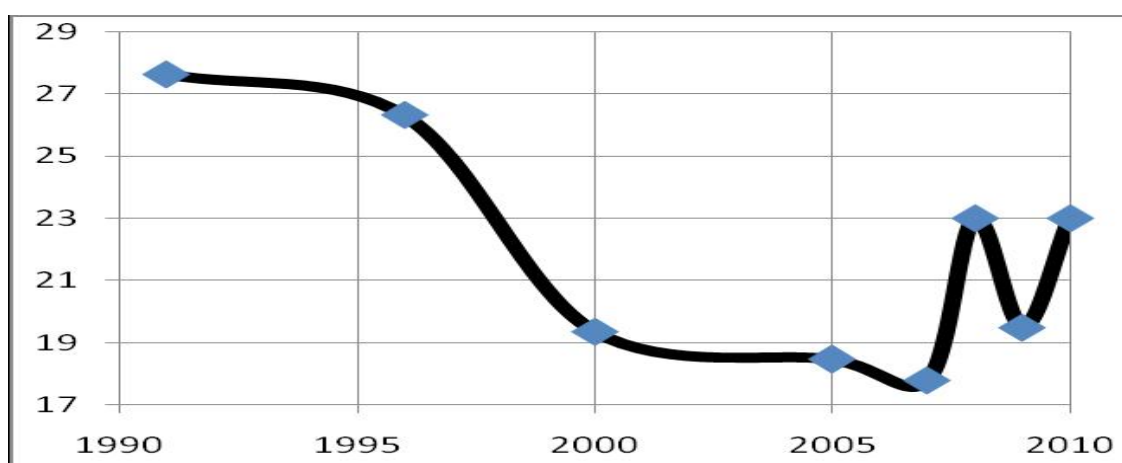


Fig. 1. Proportion of population living below \$2 a day income poverty line.

Source: Abdou and Zaasou, 2013.

⁶⁶ Noha Bakr, "The Egyptian Revolution," Chapter 4. In: *Change and Opportunities in the Emerging Mediterranean*, by Stephen Calleya and Monika Wohlfeld, eds. (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2012): 57-81. Available from: <https://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/150394/Chapter_4_-_Noha_Bakr.pdf>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

⁶⁷ "Human Development Report 2007-2008," UNDP report, 2008. Available from: <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/268/hdr_20072008_en_complete.pdf> Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

⁶⁸ World Bank Development Research Group, "Poverty headcount ratio at \$2 a day (PPP) (% of population), 2011. Available from: <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

Agricultural inflation also put extraordinary pressure on Egypt's working class because their wages were overwhelmingly spent on food to sustain themselves.⁶⁹ Another impact that contributed to an already exhausted economy was oil prices. Egypt was vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices, and its consequences were most deeply felt on the middle class. As harvests declined, the cost of production and transport began to increase especially as oil prices increased, and the price of imported food, particularly wheat, began to escalate. Rising costs of bread, low supplies of water, and sharp rises in the cost of other crucial items were fundamental elements of discontent among the Egyptian populace.

While Egyptians from many walks of life took place in the 2011 uprising, what formed the basis of the revolt was the extraordinary number of young people who participated in the demonstrations. For years a corrupt government overlooked putting resources into and investing in the younger generation, creating widespread dissatisfaction that provided grounds for revolt. Youth unemployment at the time of the uprising was 26.3%⁷⁰ (see Figure 2). Technology became an important tool in the uprising because the youth population was extremely tech-savvy. With technology proliferation and improved information literacy, digital media became a proximate cause of the Egyptian uprising. Social media offered speed and interactivity that were absent in traditional mobilization techniques.

⁶⁹ Akcesme, "Poverty and economic inequality."

⁷⁰ World Bank Data, "Unemployment Youth Total, 1991-2014." Available from: <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=EG>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

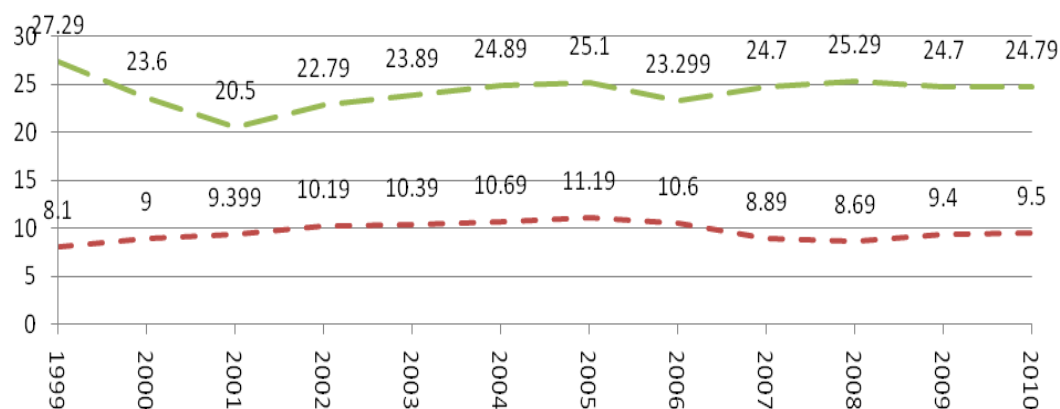


Fig. 2. Unemployment rate and employment to population ratio, 1999-2010.

Source: Abdou & Zeinab, 2013: 102.

Egypt is known for its vibrant blogosphere and relatively liberal policies on online content, unlike Iran and other Arab countries. Prior to the uprising, Egyptians used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to post mobilization strategies. Facebook became one of the most popular tools during that time with almost 5 million registered users in Egypt. It was best suited for organizing protests, starting with a group of friends that would snowball to their friends and so on. In a short period, more and more people joined the initiative.

Twitter was ideal for coordinating people who had already joined the protest. Because of the nature of Twitter which enables everyone to follow others, it soon became a tool for reporting about events in Egypt to the outside world, while YouTube supported those messages with videos. By combining the different types of social media tools and their multiple functions, Egyptians were able to mobilize quickly and attracted many followers.

One of the most influential was the Facebook page, “We are all Khaled Said,” referring to a young blogger who was beaten and killed after allegedly posting an incriminating video of two police officers splitting the drugs they seized. Media reports and bloggers claimed that Said was approached by two police officers who demanded money. When he told them he didn’t have any, they began beating him until he died on June 6, 2010. In reaction to his murder, Wael Ghonim, Middle Eastern marketing director for Google, created a Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said” and publicized the photos of Said’s corpse. The page quickly became a platform for discussions and shared grievances regarding President Mubarak’s regime and its routine police brutality against civilians. The event became a key politically motivated event that contributed to the January 25 uprising. It was effectively used to frame an issue around which protesters could unite. His death framed the cause and addressed the politics of a process that can turn a group or an idea into a movement.⁷¹

In the week prior to January 25, 2011, notice of a protest was posted on the “We are Khaled Said” Facebook page, and Egyptian citizens were asked to join. Some 80,000 people pledged that they would attend.⁷² Prior to January 25, a number of people contemplated going, although one “prominent blogger conceded that even he wasn’t taking the mobilization seriously.”⁷³ That day, some 20,000 people went out on the streets—a record-breaking turnout. This cannot be attributed solely to social media.

⁷¹ Felix Tusa, “How social media can shape a protest movement: The cases of Egypt in 2011 and Iran in 2009,” *Arab Media and Society*, 17 (2013): 5.

⁷² Wendy Pearlman, “Emotions and the microfoundations of the Arab uprising,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 2 (2013): 397.

⁷³ Kahalil Ashraf. “*Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of a Nation*” (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012), 130.

Rather, the collective action was the result of despair, oppression, and hope; people showed up because they had had enough. Social media simply gave them the tool to communicate their message and to organize. Perhaps the high turnout could be attributed to the large number of people who pledged on Facebook “I am attending,” which in some way gave them a sense that they were not alone because thousands of other people had also pledged. During that time, social media provided the protesters a new tool to influence the dynamics of mobilization, which led to its success.

While one cannot argue that this was an Internet revolution, one can emphasize the resources that Egyptian people used to implement the revolution. The availability of resources made mobilization possible, and in the case of Egypt, access to resources became easier because of social media. This connectedness can actually be attributed to the Egyptian government, which started a government initiative in 1999 to expand Egypt’s information technology capabilities as one way to promote socioeconomic development by providing free Internet access, low-cost computers and the expansion of Internet access centers.⁷⁴ In the Arab world Egypt was viewed as technologically developed. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology counted 23 million broadband Internet users in a population of 83 million, with 9 million cell phone Internet users.⁷⁵ During the one month period between January 10 and February 10, 93 million tweets were exchanged within Egypt, and between Egypt and the outside world.⁷⁶ Egyptian protestors used social media for a minute by minute updates and to draw

⁷⁴ Eltantawy and Wiest, 5.

⁷⁵ Aouragh, and Alexander, “The Egyptian Experience,” 1347.

⁷⁶ Bakr, “The Egyptian Revolution.”

attention when in danger. *The Guardian* cited tweets by Egyptian video journalist Mouhamed Abdelfatthan:

@mfatta7 Tear gas

@mfatta7 I'm suffocating

@mfatta7 We r trapped inside a building

@mfatta7 Armored vehicles outside

@mfatta7 Help we r suffocating

@mfatta7 I will be arrested

@mfatta7 Help !!!

@mfatta7 Arrested

*@mfatta7 Ikve [I've] been beaten a lot*⁷⁷

In addition, he posted pictures of the protest and police brutality, all of which generated international attention that later led to Mubarak's resignation.⁷⁸

Successful mobilization would not have been possible without satellite television, which has always been popular in Egypt. It was another powerful medium in terms of outreach. With almost all household owning a television in 2010, "72 percent of Egyptians depended on television as a primary source of political news; television channels have the best shot at influencing the opinions of nearly 75 percent of

⁷⁷ *The Guardian* Newsblog. "Protests in Egypt and Unrest in the Middle East—as it happened," January 25, 2011. Available from: <<https://www.theguardian.com/global/blog/2011/jan/25/middleeast-tunisia>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

⁷⁸ *Guardian* Newsblog.

Egyptians.”⁷⁹ During the uprising, Al-Jazeera became the primary source of real-time news for Egyptians. Al-Jazeera had seven teams in Cairo and multiple reporters throughout Egypt, all of whom were covering the uprisings from different cities. Al-Jazeera was the only news outlet that streamed live reports out of Egypt and updated the global audience on the evolving situation. It also made its content available to other news sources with charge and without permission.⁸⁰ The ensuing cross-references between social media tools and Al-Jazeera by re-tweets from Egyptian protesters on the streets, was important for ensuring the credibility, authenticity, and validity of the social media content. It also played a role in ensuring that people’s voices were heard and unified.

The use of social media also proved to be invaluable when the government banned reporters from Tahrir Square to prevent news from spreading to the world; during that time, social media tools enabled protesters to become citizen journalists. When President Mubarak’s regime realized that social media were being used for organizing, he ordered the shutdown of the Internet and cellular communications, and suspended Al-Jazeera, canceling its licenses and withdrawing the accreditation of its entire staff as of January 30, 2011.⁸¹ Aware of the monetary effect such a shutdown would bring, President Mubarak had no other choice if he wanted to keep the revolution under control. The economic impact of the Internet shutdown was enormous: an estimated \$90 million

⁷⁹ Guardian newsblog, 24.

⁸⁰ Sam Gustin, “As Egypt erupts, Al Jazeera offers its news for free to other networks,” *Wired*, Jan. 28, 2011. Available from: <<http://www.wired.com/2011/01/al-jazeera-egypt/>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

⁸¹ Rasha Abdulla, “Egypt’s media in the midst of revolution,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2014): 58. Available from: <<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/mapping-digital-media-egypt-20130823.pdf>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

in losses.⁸² However, Egyptian activists and citizens figured how to bypass government censorship by using intermediary servers, landlines, and traditional mobilization techniques. This flow of information kept the social mobilization going and reinforced collective actions. Howard argues that government efforts to crack down on social media actually may have encouraged more public activists. People who were isolated because of the Internet shutdown (mostly middle-class Egyptians) went out on the streets when they could no longer follow events through social media and television.⁸³

Even after Egyptian government shut down the Internet, Egyptians were already mobilized, out on the streets, and conversations moved from online to offline and face to face. The government's action angered many people but also forced them to use offline forms of communication and mobilization to keep the momentum going and to mobilize those who did not have Internet access. This was achieved with the use of taxi drivers to spread the information.⁸⁴

Another important factor that contributed to Egyptian success is the response level of the government, at the beginning of the uprising President Mubarak was unwilling to employ decisive force to stem the uprising. The inability to deal with the crisis from the get goes was in small part caused by the Egyptian military's refusal to crack down on protesters. This emboldened protestor and allowed the rebellion to gain the momentum.

⁸² Sahar Khamis, and Katherine Vaughn, "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How civic engagement and citizen journalism tilted the balance," *Arab Media and Society*, 14 (2011). Available from: <<http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=769x>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

⁸³ Howard. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship*.

⁸⁴ Tusa, "How social media can shape a protest movement."

In Egypt, the military is the most powerful institution, and it supported President Mubarak throughout his entire tenure. Yet, during the uprising, the military chose not to act, sending a clear signal that the military favored the demonstrators and that its expected support of the union and President Mubarak's administration had ended, thus clearing the way for Mubarak's exit. The military showed its independence from the civilian and political apparatus, and demonstrated its influential status in the country.

Summary

Calling the Egyptian and Iranian uprisings a "Twitter revolution" or a "Facebook revolution" does not capture the deep-seated factors behind those revolutions. It was primarily socioeconomic and political discontent, facilitated by social media. It must be said, however, for most Egyptians living on two dollars a week, political activity was the last thing on their mind. But the Egyptian uprising could not have happened as it did without the existence of social media. That said, there is no doubt that social media played a contributing role in the Egyptian revolution, and helped bring to the forefront a revolution that had been developing in the background, fueled by socio-political conditions.

Some scholars assert that Egypt was ripe for revolution,⁸⁵ and dramatic change would have come at some point in the next few years, even without spark of Tunisia or the existence of social media. It is important to acknowledge that in the context of the Egyptian uprising, social media played a part in arranging protests and bringing the

⁸⁵ Richard Haass, "Reflections on the Revolution in Egypt," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Feb. 13, 2011. Available from: <<http://www.cfr.org/egypt/reflections-revolution-egypt/p24102>>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

attention of the international community. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and YouTube were all used to achieve different purposes and share the message. A combination of these social media tools favored mobilization, making it much faster and cheaper to mobilize many people in a short period of time. It was easier for activists to disseminate messages and videos to an international audience, thus strengthening the collective identity and mobilizing the citizens.

Chapter V

The Political Situation in Iran

The 2009 Iranian Revolution (also known as the “Green Revolution,” or the “Twitter Revolution”) did not appear suddenly out of nowhere. It was the culmination of events that began with Iran’s tenth presidential election held on June 12, 2009. At the time, many young Iranians were dissatisfied with the administration’s seeming inability to address their needs. People felt disregarded, especially when the government refused to spend resources and establish programs to address the huge problem of youth unemployment. Like Egypt, the roots of the Iranian uprising were based on socio-political issues in the country. The complex and corrupt political structure angered people, as well double-digit inflation. Combined with other economic problems, rising unemployment problem added further fuel to the fires of discontent. In this chapter, I focus on background information and the combination of factors that contributed to the Iranian Revolution. The primary focus is on the extent to which social media was integral to the mobilization in Iran.

The political structure of Iran is very complex. The government is a fusion of an authoritarian state with a theocratic regime, where the religious authority and religious law is part of the country’s legal code. In this system, a mullah (often referred to as “Supreme Guide”) has unlimited power without responsibility, while the elected President has more responsibility than power.

Iran is a clientelistic state, meaning it is a combination of both “traditional and religious relations between superior and subordinates.”⁸⁶ A clientelistic government prevents class division, and demands are achieved through bribing government agencies rather than exerting pressure for legal and political reform. The lack of class divisions also creates obstacles to development. In modern types of clientelism, the source of income is the nation’s rentier status, and in Iran that is oil. Therefore, in modern political clientelism, patrons aim to hold government positions so they can have access to government payouts.

The power structure is composed of many autonomous, parallel groups formed through patron-client bonds.⁸⁷ Iran’s political landscape is not a canopy-like structure, in which a central pole holds the structure together; instead, it is built on many rival, parallel, and independent pillars of power that hold the system together.⁸⁸ The power structures are based on rival but autonomous groups, and traditional Shi’a institutions sometimes conflict with the elected government.⁸⁹ This structure of parallel, unelected institutions is designed to keep both the executive and legislative apparatus in check. The dual power structure is headed by a supreme leader and a president, respectively.

⁸⁶ Lowell Barrington, *Comparative Politics: Structures and Choices* (Covington, KY: Wadsworth Publishing, 2012): 339.

⁸⁷ Kazem Alamdari, “The power structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from populism to clientelism, and militarization of the government,” *Third World Quarterly*, 26, no. 8, (2005): 13. Available from: <<http://www-tandfonline-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/01436590500336690?needAccess=true>>.

⁸⁸ Alamdari, “Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 14.

⁸⁹ Alamdari, “Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 2.

The highest religious office is held by the Ayatollah, at present Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, also called the Supreme Leader. He appoints the head of the judiciary, six members of the powerful Guardian Council, the commanders of all the armed forces, Friday prayer leaders, and the heads of radio and television. He also makes decisions on security, defense, and major foreign policy issues. Furthermore, he also confirms the president's election. The Leader is chosen by clerics who make up the Assembly of Experts.⁹⁰

Based on the Iranian constitution, the role of president ranks him as “the second highest official in the country.”⁹¹ The president's job is to ensure that the constitution is implemented. However, the “clerics and conservatives in Iran's power structure circumscribe presidential powers.”⁹²

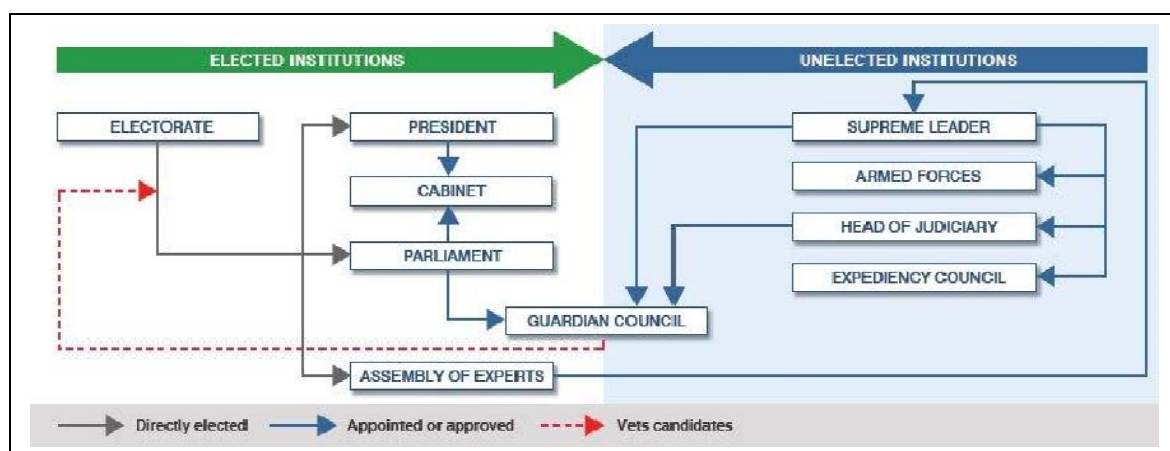


Fig. 3: Political structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Source: BBC, 2009.

⁹⁰ BBC. “How Iran is Ruled,” July 9, 2009. Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8051750.stm#cabinet>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2017.

⁹¹ BBC, “How Iran is Ruled.”

⁹² BBC, “How Iran is Ruled.”

Due to this complex structure, reforms in Iran are difficult to achieve. Scholars argue that while changes are needed, it is not religious reform but rather political and economic reforms. The post-election protest was not about religious reform or regime change but a cry for socioeconomic improvements.

As 2009 progressed toward election day, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's political and popular standing appeared to be declining due to the weakening economic environment in Iran. At the beginning of his first presidential term in 2005, oil prices were rising steadily, peaking at \$150 per barrel by July 2008, of which the Iranian government received 80%. Investors injected billions of dollars into the economy through handouts and cheap loans. However, high oil prices and easy access to money also led to extensive inflation.

In the first half of 2009, oil prices began to decline precipitously, eventually reaching \$50 per barrel. At that point, Ahmadinejad's generosity at government expense began to turn against him. Inflation was running high; the cost of housing and food were at all-time highs, and economic activity was slowing down because of rapid declines in foreign reserves. Since Iran's economy was heavily dependent on the price of crude oil, and the country was also under international economic sanctions due to its ongoing nuclear program, the overall economic outlook began to have a negative effect on the public's perception of Ahmadinejad as president, and many people mobilized against his policies that weakened the performance of the Iranian economy. Even scholars predicted that "if change is to come to Iran, social and economic discontent would be a major reason."⁹³

⁹³ Nikki R. Keddie, "Women and 30 years of the Islamic Republic," *Middle East Institute Viewpoints*, January 2009:48. Available from: <<http://www.mei.edu/content/women-and-30-years-islamic-republic>>. Accessed Feb. 21, 2017.

What is also important is that more than 30 years of changes in the demographics of Iran have led to political and social shifts. The main protagonists of this change are known as “the children of the revolution”⁹⁴—young people who were born at the beginning of the revolution, and have grown up in a nation that went from being one of the most liberal societies in the Middle East to a nation ruled by conservatives and religious institutions. The nation also went through a devastating eight-year war with Iraq, extreme swings in standards of living caused by oil booms and busts and crippling sanctions. Consequently, the “children of the revolution” could often be found at the front lines leading Iran’s uprising. They were highly educated, highly politicized, took their voting rights seriously (voting age is 16), and many willingly expressed their discontent with the social and political systems in place in 2009.

Approximately 70% of Iranian youth live in urban centers, which increases the pressure on social institutions to provide services and employment.⁹⁵ The unemployment rate among young people was 26% in Iran (see Figure 4), and “The average young Iranian graduate waits nearly three years for his first job and then his earning power is, and will almost always be, less than his parents.”⁹⁶ Young people felt they had no future, especially given the absence of employment opportunities available to them upon

⁹⁴ Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh, *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic* (I. B. Touris, 2013), 16.

⁹⁵ Seregey Votyagov, “Islamic Republic of Iran; Comparative National Systems,” 2009. Available from: <<http://www.mitchellorenstein.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Iran.pdf>>. Accessed Feb. 21, 2017.

⁹⁶ Navtej Dhillon, and Daniel Egel, “The many crises of Iranian youth,” HuffPost, n.d. Available from: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/navtej-dhillon/the-many-crises-of-iran_b_220897.html>.

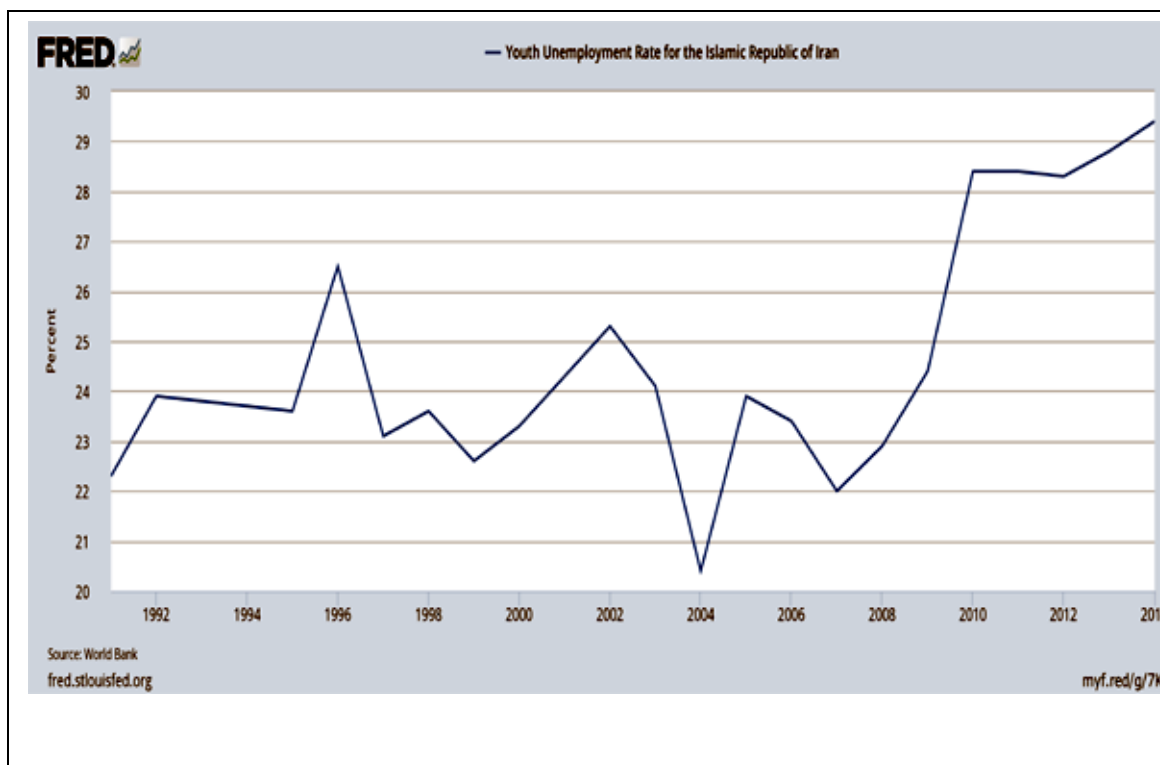


Fig. 4. Youth unemployment rate in Iran, 1991-2014.

Source: World Bank, “Youth unemployment rate for Iran.”

graduation.⁹⁷ Furthermore, women did not have the same rights as men, and many believed it was time for a change. Most people were convinced that reforms would come with the new government following the elections. Given the level of discontentment, when the election results were disclosed, the public was shocked and outraged. Iranians expected that Mousavi would win the election, so when the results showed that Ahmadinejad had won again, many of Mousavi’s supporters poured into the streets to protest the election outcome and question its validity. Frustration was already present

⁹⁷ Charlotte Burchet, “The Iranian Green Movement: A promising uprising to a failed revolution,” Regional Insights website, February 2016. Available from: <<http://www.regional-insights.org/content/iranian-green-movement-promising-uprising-failed-revolution>>. Accessed February 21, 2017.

owing to the hardships of daily life, so the election became the tipping point, with people taking to social media to protest what they believed to be a rigged election.

There is little doubt that social media played a role in Iranian politics, in this case focusing the world's attention on the 2009 uprising. At the time, Iran led the region in Internet penetration rates, with approximately 49% of the population using some form of social media. The country also saw rapid growth in Internet use, from 250,000 users in December 2000 to approximately 36.5 million by mid-2011.⁹⁸ Iranian mobile phone use far outpaced Internet use. In 2009, Iran had 30.2 million mobile phone users, with 88 cellular subscriptions for every 100 people, and Internet access was widespread.⁹⁹

During the revolution, Iranians relied heavily on Twitter, Facebook, text messaging, and blogs created by local Iranians to quickly organize and coordinate opposition efforts and public demonstrations. At the time, many saw Twitter as providing a liberating outlet for dissenters, and the Western media heralded the Green Movement as a "Twitter revolution." In truth, at the time of the revolution there were 19,235 Iranian twitter users in an estimated population of 70 million, obviously a small fraction. However, this number cannot be verified since some users registered themselves as being in Iran when in fact they were located elsewhere.¹⁰⁰ The Web Ecology Project confirmed that most of the tweets about the election came from outside Iran.¹⁰¹ At the peak of the

⁹⁸ Freedom House website, 2009.

⁹⁹ Freedom House website, 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Sysomos blogsite, "A Look at Twitter in Iran," June 21, 2009. Available from: <<http://blog.sysomos.com/2009/06/21/a-look-at-Twitter-in-iran/>>. Accessed Feb. 22, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Web Ecology Project, June 26, 2009. Available from: <<http://www.webecologyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/WEP-twitterFINAL.pdf>>. Accessed Feb. 22, 2017.

protest #IranElection topped 221,744 tweets in one hour.¹⁰² In fact, however, the word was spread at home rather than by people becoming mobilized and coming out to participate in the protests. Also, the hype of the tweets came mainly from outside Iran and from the Iranian diaspora that participated remotely. “Due to the small percentage of tweets that originated in Iran, it seems Twitter has been used as a system for publicizing events in Iran to the rest of the world instead of as an organizing tool for Iranians during protests”¹⁰³ (see Figures 5 and 6).

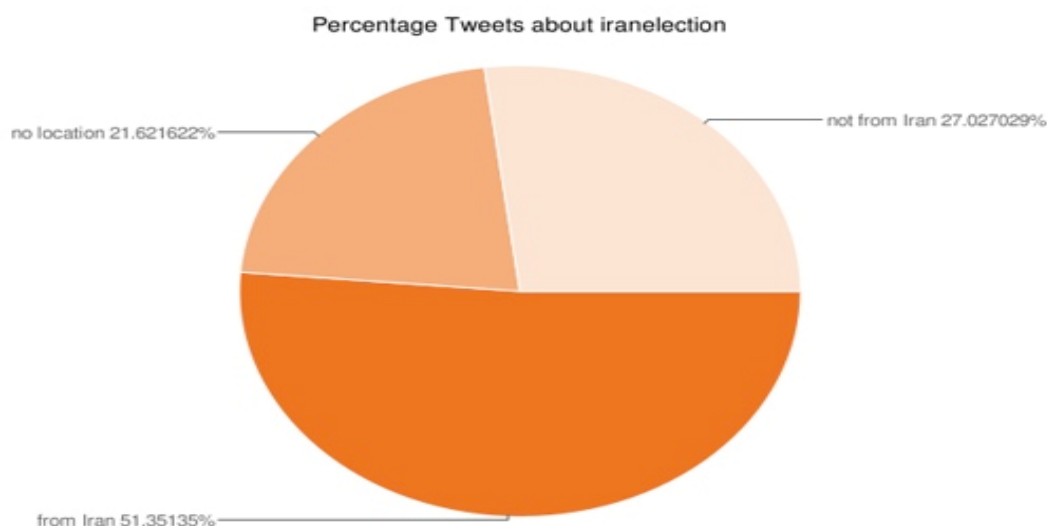


Fig. 5: Percentage of tweets about #IranElection

Note: This figure shows the percentage of tweets that came from Iran before the government shut down the Internet and social media.

Source: Sysomos blogsite.

¹⁰² Ben Parr, “Mindblowing #IranElection stats: 221,744 Tweets per hour at peak.” Mashable website, June 17, 2009. Available from: <<http://mashable.com/2009/06/17/iranelection-crisis-numbers/#gpJGzTtCJEqW>>. Accessed Feb. 22, 2017.

¹⁰³ Jamileh Kadivar, “A Comparative Study of Government Surveillance of Social Media and Mobile Phone Communications during Iran’s Green Movement (2009) and the UK Riots (2011),” *Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2015): 175. Available from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303111114_A_Comparative_Study_of_Government_Surveillance_of_Social_Media_and_Mobile_Phone_Communications_during_Iran's_Green_Movement_2009_and_the_UK_Riots_2011>. Accessed Feb. 21, 2017.

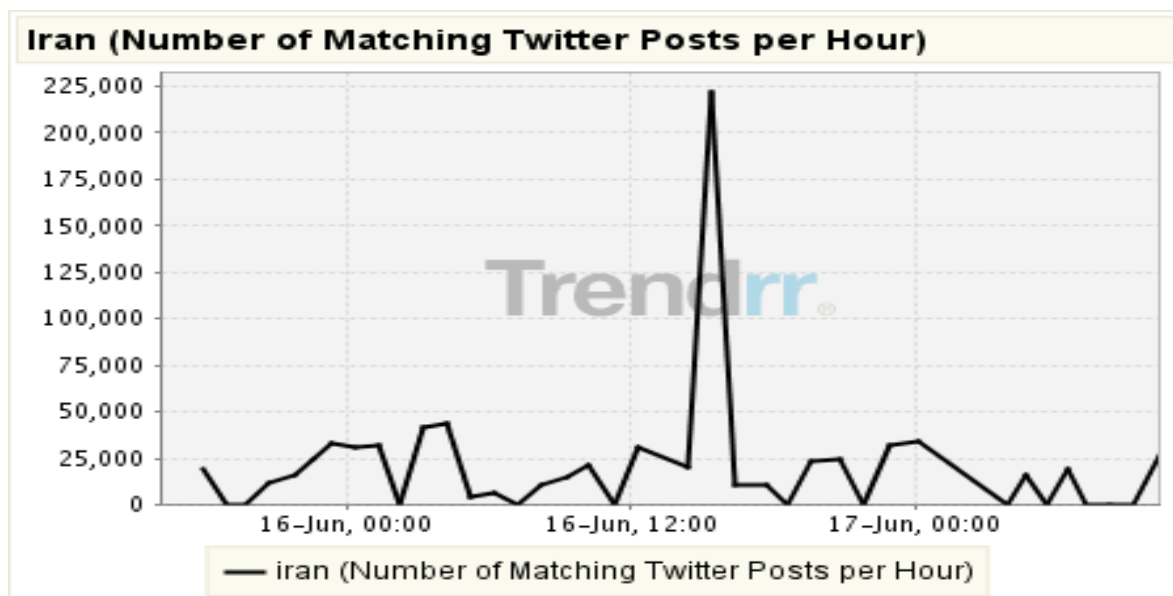


Fig. 6: Number of tweets on #IranElection per hour

Note: At the peak of Iranian revolution, the #Irenelection reached 221,774 tweets per hour, demonstrating that the uprising was being followed by a world-wide audience.

Source: Parr, 2009

Some believe the Western media may have misrepresented the role of Twitter and Facebook in the uprising, since the penetration of social media did not have as much impact on people at the time.¹⁰⁴ Many were influenced by Iran's state-owned television and radio. But Clay Shirky argues that the Internet and social media allowed Iranian reformists to "coordinate with one another better than previously, and to broadcast events like Basij violence to the rest of the world."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Peter Beaumont, "The truth about Twitter, Facebook, and the uprisings in the Arab world," *Guardian*, Feb. 25, 2011. Available from: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/25/twitter-facebook-uprisings-arab-libya>>. Accessed Feb. 21, 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Clay Shirky, "The net advantage," *Prospect*, December 11, 2009. Available from: <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/12/the-net-advantage/>>.

The government's responsiveness also played a role in the outcome of the Iranian revolution. Unlike Egypt, the Iranian regime was brutal and uncompromising. Despite the peaceful nature of demonstrations, the police and a paramilitary group called Basij suppressed the protestors by attacking and arresting them. The government response struck "fear in the hearts of protesters decreases their numbers with each passing day."¹⁰⁶ Contrary to the Egyptian military which held back on taking a stand, Iran's military maintained close ties to the "government and over the years have become even more entwined within the political and economic activities of the regime."¹⁰⁷ The position of the Iranian military would be greatly compromised if the regime fell from power, so it was in their own interests to protect the regime from change.

It is interesting to note that while the protesters used social media during the movement, the Iranian authorities used it against the protesters as well. The government was known for its use of filtering technology and media censorship, and the approaching election led to an increase in online surveillance. By taking advantage of the increased use of social media, the Iranian government became even more powerful than before the election, allowing the government to introduce a more advanced system of surveillance and recognition that "strengthened the government's position after the election."¹⁰⁸ Thereafter, government surveillance intensified, and "the government started sending threatening and warning text messages to protesters about their presence in the

¹⁰⁶ Motlagh, "Egypt and Iran."

¹⁰⁷ Motlagh, "Egypt and Iran."

¹⁰⁸ Kadivar, "A Comparative Study of Government Surveillance," 176.

protests.”¹⁰⁹ The Iranian authorities too measures to steps all the online correspondence and used them as reasons for judicial discipline. They even extended their reach and began to intimidate and undermine Iranians abroad.¹¹⁰

Summary

The Iranian Green Revolution in 2009 came to world attention through social media sharing. Protestors used social media to organize, but it was also about mobilization of certain groups. However, broad penetration to the general masses was difficult to achieve using only social media. Iranian scholar Kaveh Eshani noted that news of the protest moved more slowly because it did not reflect the structure of Iranian society; otherwise, it might have resulted in widespread mobilization. But dissemination of mobilization messages did not reach all classes of society owing to government censorship and shutdown of the Internet. Furthermore, Iran also did not make use of traditional mobilization techniques, such as television and print.

In Egypt, in addition to social media, traditional mobilization techniques were also used, meaning that organizers went out into rural areas of Cairo to mobilize the lower class. Protesters knew that those people were not on social media so they used other techniques to achieve mass mobilization. The Egyptian case demonstrated that the use of traditional media in combination with social media resulted in broad exposure and greater mobilization. The traditional media forms also played a major role in shifting the

¹⁰⁹ Kadivar, “A Comparative Study of Government Surveillance,” 176.

¹¹⁰ Kadivar, “A Comparative Study of Government Surveillance,” 176.

American position toward the Mubarak regime, with powerful images broadcast on Al-Jazeera and circulated via social media networks.¹¹¹

In Iran, in the post-election period, the government blocked Facebook and Google, shut down the cell phone network, and forcibly removed the foreign press. Moreover, the government expected the uprisings and it was prepared. It used Internet connectivity as a tool of counterinsurgency. Freed from international scrutiny, the government had the upper hand. It used the very same social media tools to quell dissent by launching a “global campaign of intimidation.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Lynch, “After Egypt,” 306.

¹¹² Peterson, *Let the Swords Encircle Me*, 620.

Chapter VI

Analysis of the Role of Social Media in the Egyptian and Iranian Uprisings

In order to understand the impact of social media usage, I analyzed the Egypt 2011 uprising and the 2009 Iran post- election protest. The effects of social media in both protests is undeniable, although it cannot be said that social media and the Internet were the sole cause of these uprisings. My analysis identifies how these protests took place with the help of social media, which facilitated and coordinated social mobilization in both instances.

The Egyptian Uprising

The more positive outcome in Egypt can be attributed to several factors. Most important was the lack of an immediate response by the government. President Mubarak seemed unwilling to employ decisive force to stem the uprising, and his failure to do so encouraged the protestors and enabled them to gain momentum. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the Egyptian military refused to crack down on the protestors. That absence of a forceful reaction on the part of the regime prompted scenes that had never been seen before amid the protests.

Second, traditional media played a crucial role in broadcasting news of the unrest to the rest of the world, while also putting pressure on the Egyptian government. The addition of social media, which was everywhere among young Egyptians, played a major role in quickly spreading information, videos, and pictures, which hastened the

mobilization. The credibility of these tools was confirmed by already-respected mediums such as Al-Jazeera, BBC World, and so on. The fact that traditional media themselves used social media tools as sources of information, along with the interactions between social media and the satellite broadcasters, kept the momentum and mobilization strong and built increasing pressure from the international community to intervene in the matter.

A third factor was the strategies used for effective mobilization. The Egyptian people did not rely solely on social media, even though Internet communication was faster. Protesters knew that to mobilize the wider population they had to use traditional methods of communication and face-to-face interaction. This strategy proved to be better for political planning and organizing, as it is built strong ties by building trust. My analysis found that the Internet and social media proved more useful for unifying people and creating a common political identity. This process was an important part of the Egyptian social movement, and a key learning about how populations can be mobilized through this process.

The Iranian Uprising

The 2009 Green Movement began as a peaceful uprising, but the regime's response was anything but. Several factors contributing to the eventual outcome. The first was the government structure itself. Iran's government is very complex, and change is not easily achieved. It is a country of numerous paradoxes—a theocracy and a written constitution, with (at the same time) traditional and secular values. That fusion of religion and politics defined the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2009.

When the protest began, the regime stopped it before it transformed into a full revolution. Motlagh said, “The Iranian regime’s immediate response was brutal and uncompromising,”¹¹³ which played a major role in hindering mobilization. That iron-hand style of control allowed the regime to suppress any opposition and most protestors. The government also applied military force to suppress the uprising. Furthermore, during the uprising the government cut communications inside and outside the country, jammed the Internet, and blocked all major social media sites. The organizers and protestors had no way to communicate. Eventually, the government regained control through fear, manipulation, and violence, but those actions had the psychological impact of striking fear into the hearts of protestors.

The lack of any media presence was another important factor that played into the Iranian outcome. Foreign journalists and non-state media were banished immediately after the election. The only media available was the state-owned media that did not transmit any information about the uprising. During that time, the Iranian government blocked Facebook and all political blogs. Only Twitter was available, and it quickly became the main tool for organizing protests. Why did Twitter remain available? Because its server is based in the US.

Another factor was the organization strategies used by the protestors. There was no clearly framed and articulated desire for political change as there would be in Egypt when they desired an end to Mubarak’s regime. What specifically unified the Iranians was outrage over the results of a presidential election. Many were caught by surprise at the outcome. The pre-election period showed a relatively inactive society, with press

¹¹³ Motlagh, “Egypt and Iran.”

reports talking about a general disinterest among Iranians prior to the election. One editorial in an Iranian newspaper noted: “If a foreign expert visits our country in the current situation and watched TV, he [would] not believe that the presidential election will be held in Iran in less than two months.”¹¹⁴

The number of social media users was estimated to be 19,235 — a small fraction of the Iranian population of some 70 million people. The low number showed that social media in Iran was not used at the time as a primary source of information. Also, the use of social media tools is very limited in Iran since the regime began using the same social media tools against the protesters by sending threatening messages to intimidate citizens. Overall, social media tools did not have an extensive impact in the Iranian upspring due to societal structure and social media penetration but also because of government structure and regime responsiveness.

Relationship with the United States

One other important factor was the relationship each country had with the United States. It is no secret that United States was a supporter and generous sponsor of President Mubarak’s regime. The US provided Egypt with annual military aid of approximately \$1.3 billion, mainly to maintain an Arab-Israeli peace and to curb Iran’s growing influence in the region.¹¹⁵ Mubarak was concerned about how he would be perceived by the world if he used force in the uprising, especially since the regime lacked

¹¹⁴ Tusa, “How Social Media Can Shape a Protest Movement,” 9.

¹¹⁵ Jeremy Sharp, “Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, Feb. 25, 2016. Available from: <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>>. Accessed Feb. 22, 2017.

sufficient economic resources. As the world became aware of the uprising, that also contributed to Mubarak's inability to act decisively.

In contrast, the regime in Iran was not at all concerned about its use of force in response to the protest, because the regime did not feel obliged to answer to any foreign power. It could simply dismiss external objections because of its rentier state status.

As Motlagh noted: "The antagonistic relationship between the United States and Iran continuously provided both sides with a bogeyman."¹¹⁶ This hostile relationship enabled the Iranian regime to use to "great effect its efforts to neutralize the Green Movement."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Motlagh, "Egypt and Iran."

¹¹⁷ Motlagh, "Egypt and Iran."

Chapter VII

Conclusion

*“Twitter doesn’t cause revolutions, but revolutions are tweeted”*¹¹⁸

The aim of this thesis was to explore the extent to which social media was utilized to facilitate the effective and widespread mobilization of protesters during the 2011 Egyptian uprising and the 2009 Iran Green Movement uprising. I sought to determine what other factors might explain the overthrow of the earlier Iranian regime to the 2009 uprising, which ultimately did not succeed, in part because of the lack of social media tools.

While social media is important in both contexts, other media and other influential factors—the level of authoritarianism, access to traditional media, national resources—cannot be ignored. Some scholars believe social media caused these protests and argue that without social media, the protests would not have occurred. However, my research found that social media was not the root cause of the protests in either country. Rather, my analysis demonstrated that organizing social movements in Egypt and Iran was affected by the government regime, as well as political and social factors.

An examination of these two case studies found that social media played a major role in building a collective identity within the population and among the protesters and

¹¹⁸ Lynch, “After Egypt,” 304.

greatly facilitated the cross-class social mobilization in Egypt. In that uprising, social media was used to frame a cause, and mobilize and organize the social movement that led to regime change. However, Egyptian protestors also used traditional mobilization techniques, which helped them achieve a cross-class mobilization. This occurred only with the help of traditional media that at the time was reporting live from Egypt and updating the world on the situation.

Also, cross-coverage between social media and traditional media was important for building the credibility and authenticity of the media content. The traditional media played a major role in shifting the American position toward Mubarak, clearly influenced by powerful images broadcast on Al-Jazeera and circulated via social media. In contrast, during the post-election period in Iran, the government expelled all foreign press from the country, and the Internet was blocked, including Facebook and other blogs. The only means of communication left to Iranians was Twitter. But the effectiveness of Twitter for organization and mobilization was doubtful. Twitter gained public visibility in 2009 with “news breaks” that provided timely information that the traditional media could not produce. But in 2009, Twitter was a fairly novel technology to the rest of the world, which was apparent in its low user membership. There were only 8,654 Twitter users in Iran in mid-May 2009, although this number increased dramatically when the revolution started; still, it was only a tiny fraction of the overall Iranian population. It is obvious that the Iranian uprising was not a so-called “Twitter revolution” as proclaimed by the Western media; indeed, most of the tweets about the election and subsequent uprising came from outside Iran.

Each of the factors described here led to the level of discontent necessary to create the civil unrest that became transformed into a unified movement. There is no doubt that people used social media to build a political response. However, they were not inspired by social media but by real tragedies that were documented by social media.

It is difficult to conclude whether the uprisings would have happened without social media. Both countries were ripe for revolution. My research showed that in the case of Egypt, social media facilitated social mobilization in an environment where it could be used to its full potential while reinforced by traditional media. The Egyptian outcome showed that a positive outcome is achievable with a less authoritarian political structure where social media tools can be used to their full potential for effective mobilization.

The lack government responsiveness encouraged people to demonstrate and gain momentum, even as President Mubarak faced pressure from the United States. Mubarak also was unable to act decisively, in large part because he was had to consider how his efforts to maintain power would affect U.S. interests.

The Iranian uprising demonstrated that change takes time, especially when it involves a complex government and regime structure. Such a structure enabled the Iranian government to suppress any form of mobilization. Moreover, an antagonistic relationship existed between the United States and Iran, and the regime used this relationship to great effect in its efforts to neutralize the uprising. Even today, Iran continues to portray the uprising as a clash of Iranian Islamic ideals and US imperialism. The Egyptian uprising had a positive outcome due to that country's political structure and a mobilization strategy that utilized social media in combination with traditional media.

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